

Hugh O'Beirne

The Fiddler of Ballinamore

Brother O Caithnia is an Irish Christian Brother. He is teaching in Swords. He has a keen interest in Irish social history. He is completing two books at the moment, 'The Bardic Schools 1200-1650' and 'History of Hurling to 1884'.

Those of us who had the privilege of listening to his lecture on the music of Leitrim in Tullaghan Community Centre during Eige Drobhaois 1976 recognised a great communicator, an expert in his field, and a fine singer. He fully deserved the repeated applause on that night. We are now glad to welcome him to The Leitrim Guardian.



Maurice Lennon, Rossinver All-Ireland Senior Fiddle Champion.

WHEN, in the summer of 1976, I spoke at Eige Drobhaois about the musical heritage of Upper Breifne, no name was invoked by me more frequently than that of Hugh O'Beirne, the Fiddler of Ballinamore. Because it is altogether unresearched, this brief notice can do little more than bring him once again to the attention of the people of Leitrim — his own people — in a general way and, perhaps, inspire some young musician or group of musicians to attempt a more detailed study of one of the most gifted of all Irish traditional fiddlers, and as a figure-type, one of the most important I can think of. I shall explain in a moment.

We know of Hugh O'Beirne because of William Forde and we know of Forde because of the great and acclaimed collector, P. W. Joyce. Joyce was sparing in his praise of others, especially of fellow-collectors in the field of traditional music, but he spared no pains in praising Forde, a Corkman, who made a magnificent collection of Irish airs from about 1840 to 1850, the year in which he died tragically in London. "This great volume of Forde's", as Joyce so uncharacteristically called it, was collected "chiefly from the Munster counties, and from a district in the north-west comprising the county Leitrim and the adjacent portions of the counties of Sligo, Mayo, Galway and Roscommon, a district never thoroughly examined before for the purpose. Forde spent some time in Ballinamore, a village in the county Leitrim: and here, as well as in other stopping-places over all that large district, he took down airs from all the pipers, fiddlers, singers and amateur collectors he could find. . . By far the most remarkable country musician he met with was Hugh O'Beirne, a fiddler of Ballinamore. . .".

Forde's collection which should be of interest to all Leitrim men is a folio volume 14½ inches by 10½ with 422 beautifully-written pages. Joyce points out that Forde intended writing an elaborate essay on the nature of his collected airs and speaks feelingly of the latter's "wide knowledge of Irish airs, with their structure, variations, and inter-relations."

In itself, this brief comment on the excellence of Forde's work should be matter for encouragement and consolation for all lovers of traditional music throughout Breifne since Leitrim

is so strongly and so accurately represented in it and by a professional fiddler, as Joyce so correctly called him, and one apparently of the highest possible calibre. So highly did Joyce rate the man from Ballinamore that he published 87 of his airs (Nos. 561-648 inclusive) in his **Old Irish Folk Music and Song**. Introducing these he says with obvious respect:

O'Beirne was a man of exceptional musical taste and culture, with a vast knowledge of Irish music, gleaned from the purest and most authentic sources. He placed his stores of knowledge and his musical skill unreservedly at the service of Forde, who mentions him everywhere throughout his collection. It does not appear that Dr. Petrie ever came across him.

Small wonder that Joyce should write so appreciatively of this man "for he well deserves to be remembered". Several times over, in comparing O'Beirne's setting of an air with another version known to himself, Joyce remarks that the Ballinamore man's version is "decidedly better", "more simple and flowing", "simpler and more vocal", and so on. Touching the "Coolin", for example, he notes that "there are many versions of this celebrated air, of which Bunting's and Moore's are not amongst the best: they are both wanting in simplicity. The setting. . . from Forde, as played for him by Hugh O'Beirne, is probably the original unadulterated melody".

Implicit in all this comment, there is a profound and touching respect for the sensitive and perceptive genius hidden in a Leitrim village. Unfortunately, as previously remarked, I have not had time to research the manuscripts bequeathed us by Forde, if only to note the nature of his observations on O'Beirne. They must have known each other extremely well. After all, to jot down accurately even a half dozen songs from a traditional fiddler involves a close partnership of mutual confidence and communication. We may assume therefore that the notation of scores of O'Beirne's airs must have entailed a collaboration of rare understanding and friendship.

I have already said that O'Beirne was a figure-type of importance. By this I mean that he typified a figure well-known to students of Irish folklore and social history, but frequently forgotten or misunderstood by those who most need to make their acquaintance. Most people are accustomed to acknowledge two kinds of musicians: professional and amateur. The former has been professionally trained, reads classical or modern music, and plays for a livelihood. The amateur may have had a little formal training, or none at all, and plays for pleasure, often in a traditional style. Hence indeed, for many of us the words amateur and traditional were interchangeable terms. O'Beirne in fact was neither of these phenomena, but belonged to a class long forgotten but of recent years coming actively again — and most successfully, I may say — to public notice. O'Beirne was **both** professional and traditional, and he was nothing else. Note how the social historian, P. W. Joyce aforementioned, in referring to this, "most remarkable country musician", (country = traditional, of course) calls him expressly a professional fiddler", which, I repeat, is what he was. Hence his importance, not for Leitrim alone, but for us all.

I cannot, unfortunately, go into the pros and cons of this perfectly legitimate claim of Joyce for the man he admired so much. Briefly, however, it may be assumed that although O'Beirne could not read music, he would have had these three qualities to some degree of excellence: (i) the

technique of traditional fiddling such as it was practised all over Ireland, and not in Leitrim only, but I cannot dilate on this subject here, (ii) a profound feeling for the phrasing, style and adornment of Irish music: in a word — taste, and (iii) a prodigious memory for Irish airs.

I cannot even begin to guess how many airs were known to O'Beirne but since Philip Goodman, the last of the Farney professional pipers as Henry Morris called him, could claim familiarity with some 500 airs (of which he still remembered the titles of 307 in 1895), how many more were in the treasury of the exceptionally gifted artist of Ballinamore? Moreover O'Beirne had the immense advantage over Goodman of having grown to manhood half a century before him, of having moved all over pre-Famine Ireland before the spirit of joy and music was destroyed and choked in a crucified people, and of having come into his musical heritage at a time when the language which enshrined almost all of these melodies was still in full spate, and of course, well known to O'Beirne (though Goodman too was a native speaker of Irish).

In considering the achievements of O'Beirne and Forde (they are best seen as a team and would have wished it so, no doubt), two things might suggest themselves to the musicians of Leitrim. The first and simplest suggestion must be to raise a fitting memorial to the man who was such an exemplary repository

of all that was finest in the traditional music of Breifne. That I think may safely be left to the people of Ballinamore. Secondly and more importantly perhaps, consideration might be given to the study and publication of what we have inherited from O'Beirne: a book or recording of his airs, versions, settings, call them what you please.

Specifically, I should like to see an attempt made to re-wed the words and music of the songs of O'Beirne — and indeed of Breifne — after their sad, protracted divorce. No doubt many of the words are long since lost. Many however are not. Even as I write I find myself lilting O'Beirne's haunting "Coolin" to the old Breifne words:

**A chúilín na n-órfholt ná pós
tusa an straoill
In ainneoin a cuid bóitheach is
órchiste an tsaoil.**

They "marry" easily and well, despite their long, arid, separation. With an effort, many more of O'Beirne's best 'singing' tunes could be accommodated with words suited to them in mood, in length and in rhythm. O'Beirne after all is best represented, not by a dust-covered manuscript, however excellent, in a Dublin library, but by the living, breathing, singing soul of a people — his people — and until that soul is again re-echoed in a surging current of their own music, joyful, sorrowful, tender, martial, we cannot claim that we have done right by the lonely prophetic traveller from Cork and the kinsman of his soul, the Fiddler of Ballinamore.

